# VA UX Guide Editorial Style Guide

**General Guidelines**

All content must be:

* User-focused
* Easy to understand
* Accurate and complete
* Grammatically correct

**Editorial Style Resources**

In addition to the guidelines in this document we use the following resources:

* [Merriam-Webster Online](http://m-w.com)
* AP Stylebook

**Naming References**

* VA Health Systems
* U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs
* Veterans Health Administration

## Style Rules

**General Style Rules**

* Content should be simple and concise, but not ambiguous or misleading.
* Content should suit the target audience, using appropriate words, phrases, and concepts.
* Content should be kept up-to-date.
* Content should be broken into chunks to facilitate scanning.
* All of the information that users need to accomplish primary goals should be available.
* Each paragraph should be designed around one idea.
* The main idea of each paragraph should come at the beginning.
* Sentences should have a minimum amount of clauses.
* Only one word should be used to describe any item.
* Using bold for emphasis is okay, but it should be kept to a minimum. Italics, underlines, and capital letters should not be used for emphasis.
* Use the active voice.
* Avoid jargon when possible.

**Navigation Labels**

Navigation labels are the text that denotes the elements in the top and left navigation.

* Navigation labels should be concise and easy to understand.
* Navigation labels should begin with identifying words that help users grasp meaning.
* Navigation labels should be consistent.
* Use title case.
* In general, do not use articles in navigation labels.

**Page Titles**

Page titles are located above the body content within a page, and are usually represented by a larger font. They are similar to headlines, and function as "road signs" that indicate what page a user is on.

* All pages should have a page title.
* Page titles should help users orient themselves.
* Page titles should be meaningful and avoid "marketing-speak."
* Use title case.
* Do not include a period at the end of a page title.
* In most cases, the URL should match the page title exactly.
* Use “and” rather than “&”.

**Subheads**

Subheads are headings for subdivisions of text within a page.

* Each subhead should reflect the main idea of the content within its subdivision.
* Subheads are effective at breaking up long pages of text.
* Use title case without period at end. If a question, end with question mark.
* Use “and” rather than “&”.

**Links**

A link is text or a graphic that is hyperlinked to another web page, a file, or another place on the same page (anchor link).

* Links are activated by user action, and can be embedded within the text or grouped as menu items.
* Link text should create an expectation of the content that users will receive.
* If you're referring to a page in a link, the link text should match the page title.
* Links should provide users with clear direction.
* If a link requires an application other than your Web browser to access content, it should be noted. (Ex: PDF, PowerPoint)
* Empty phrases such as "Click here" and "Follow this link" should not be used. These phrases do not tell the user what they will find, and won't positively impact search engine results.
* “Learn more” and “get info” link text should be followed by descriptors of where the link leads. Example: Learn more about admission requirements.
* Limit the number of embedded links in each paragraph. Too many links dilute effectiveness and don’t give users clear expectations.
* Use text links for navigation within the page. Use buttons for actions (send, submit).

**Lists**

A list is a grouping of content that contains a series of similar items.

* Lists should be bulleted or numbered, depending on the content. If items are sequential (such as step-by-step instructions), use a numbered list. If the items are non-sequential, use a bulleted list.
* There should be a paragraph break after the end of a bulleted or numbered list.
* Capitalize the first letter of the first word of each bullet point.
* Use periods after complete sentences, but not after phrases.
* In cases where mixed sentence construction (full sentences and phrases) can’t be avoided, put a period at the end of each line.

**Tables**

A table is information arranged in rows and columns.

* Column and row labels should be title case.
* Content within tables should be sentence case.
* Try to avoid abbreviations in table labels and content, unless you are certain that the audience will understand the meaning without hesitation.

**Error Messages**

Error messages appear when a user has entered invalid information, or when the site is not functioning as it should.

* Error messages should state the problem as well as the solution.
* Error messages should be written in clear language.
* Messages should clearly describe what action is necessary to fix the problem.
* Do not blame the user for the error.

**Buttons**

Buttons are links that have a graphical treatment. When a user clicks on a button, they go to another page.

* Buttons should only be used for actions such as "Search," "Continue," and "Submit."
* Use sentence-case capitalization.

**Footnotes**

Footnotes are notes of reference, explanation, or disclaimer that are placed below the main content on a page.

* Footnotes should be placed at the end of a page, below the main content.
* Use numerals, beginning with 1, as references.
* References should be superscript.
* Footnotes are page-dependent.
* Do not place information that's important to the user in a footnote. Important information should be in the main content.

**Acronyms**

An acronym is a word formed from the initial letter of each of the major parts of a compound term. (Ex: UX, HCD)

* Spell out the words that an acronym stands for on the first reference on a page, followed by the acronym in parentheses.
* In an FAQ that uses anchor links, spell out the acronym on first reference in each answer.
* Avoid acronyms in page titles when possible.

**Forms**

A form is a page on which a user enters information, such as name, address, or phone number.

* Form labels should use sentence case.
* Instructional text should provide key information to help users avoid common mistakes and provide an expectation of what they will get from filling out the form (if necessary).
* Required fields should be clearly indicated.
* After a form is submitted, the user should see a confirmation message. The confirmation message should acknowledge the action, and include at least one link with an encouraged action for the user (such as “Go to home page”).

**Metadata**

Metadata is information about a Web page that is used for indexing and search engines.

* All pages must include page title tag information. This is the page title that appears in the browser's title bar.
* Page title tags should place the page name or description first and end with school or department name if space permits.
* Use sentence case for page title tags.
* Page title tags should be less than 60 characters.
* Descriptions should be full sentences and include strategic keywords describing the content on the page.

**Style Dictionary**

**Ampersands**

Do not use an ampersand unless it is part of an official title.

**Bold**

Use a bold typeface to place emphasis on a word or phrase. When used in moderation, bolding can make long paragraphs easier to digest. Don’t use all caps for emphasis.

**Bullets**

Bullets help a user scan the page.

* Capitalize the first word of each bullet point.
* Use parallel construction. Begin bulleted items with the same part of speech.
* Put a period at the end of a bulleted item that contains a complete sentence. If a bulleted item does not contain a complete sentence, do not use a period. If a bulleted list contains both complete and incomplete sentences, put a period at the end of each bullet.
* Do not place semicolons after each bullet point, unless each point is dependent on the others for validity.

**Capitalization**

**Title Case**

All the major words are capitalized — everything except articles, conjunctions, and prepositions. Question marks and exclamation points are used where appropriate.

**Sentence Case**

The first word of a sentence is capped, along with all proper nouns. For example: Debbie knew something was wrong immediately.

**Fragment Case**

The first word of a fragment is capped, along with all proper nouns. No period at the end of the sentence. Question marks and exclamation points are used where appropriate.

**Commas**

Use the serial comma.

**Dashes**

Use m-dashes, n-dashes, and hyphens as established in the AP Stylebook. Don’t use a double dash. Put spaces around dashes.

**Italics**

Use italics sparingly. For emphasis, use bold instead.

**Numbers**

* Spell out all numbers zero to nine. Use numerals for 10 and higher.
* Exceptions:
  + Dates: September 15, 2020 (no “th” on 15)
  + Ages: 8 years-old; he was a 60-year-old man
  + Percentages: 15 percent (percent is always spelled out)
  + Temperatures
* Spell out first, second, third, etc.

**Numbered Lists**

Use numbered lists when items are sequential, such as steps in a procedure. Otherwise, use a bulleted list.

**PDFs**

Putting information only in a PDF should be avoided, if possible. If appropriate, translate text from a PDF into HTML so user doesn't have to download the file to access the information.

**Phone Numbers**

Phone numbers should be easily recognized. If you need to include a phone number in a long paragraph, break the paragraph up into chunks instead.

* Format should be XXX-XXX-XXXX
* For numbers that require an extension use: XXX-XXX-XXXX, extension XX.
* Bold a phone number if it is the primary and preferred means of contact, as well as a high priority on the page.
* If a phone number includes letters, show the numeric equivalent in parentheses immediately following the alphanumeric number.
* Include area code with all phone numbers.

**Phrases to Avoid**

* Click here: Users know that underlined text is a link, so this directive doesn't add any value. Use the link text to set up an expectation of what the user will get on the page it links to.
* Follow this link: Users know that underlined text is a link, so this directive doesn't add any value. Use the link text to set up an expectation of what the user will get on the page it links to.
* This Web site: Users know they are on a Web site.
* This page: Users know they are on a page.
* Welcome to... : Users are task-driven and want to get to the content they are looking for. "Welcome to" and similar phrases place barriers between the users and their goal.

**Time References**

* When referencing a spread of time, include hyphen with no spacing before or after:
  + 6-9 p.m.
  + 11 a.m.-noon
  + 11 a.m.-1:30 p.m.
* 12 p.m. is always noon.
* Avoid relative time references, such as soon, last year, or now. Instead use specific dates.

**Underlining**

Do not underline text for emphasis. In web conventions, underlined text indicates a hyperlink.

**Web References**

* Drop “www” from web addresses.